

Worst Places for Refugees



■ Bangladesh ■

Bangladesh makes life miserable for 178,000 Rohingya refugees. Bangladeshis raped Rohingya women with impunity, and security forces tortured at least one refugee to death. Authorities arrested hundreds fleeing persecution in Myanmar, including more than two dozen Buddhist monks after the junta's crackdown there. Bangladesh confines refugees to camps and, with no legal basis, denies them the rights to work, to practice professions, to engage in business, or to own property. Most have no legal status at all and hundreds fled again to other countries like Malaysia and Thailand. Around 10,000 live in one camp between a highway and the Naf River, where cars regularly struck and killed and frequent flooding drowned refugee children.

Rohingya refugees scale fish in a squatter camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Credit: RMMRU/C.R.Abrar



Chinese military policemen patrol the Yalu River, which marks the border between North Korea and China, in 2002. Credit: AP/G.Baker



■ China ■

China forcibly returned hundreds of North Korean refugees who tried to escape one of the world's most repressive regimes. China denied refugee status and maintained that the North Koreans in its territory were illegal immigrants, despite the clear persecution that they faced upon return—most were imprisoned for attempting to escape, and those who had contacted Christian missionaries could be executed. China banned international organizations from entering the border area, blocking most assistance to the refugees.

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European countries have crafted policies that essentially deny access by making it as difficult as possible to enter their territory. Countries on the periphery of Europe had the harshest policies, protecting their wealthy neighbors to the north and west, often for money. European countries also forcibly

returned failed asylum seekers to manifestly dangerous situations: France returned a Chadian asylum seeker who was immediately detained and forcibly interrogated, Sweden deported an Iraqi directly to Baghdad, the Greek coast guard forced boats full of potential asylum seekers back into Turkish waters, even attempting to swamp them with waves to prevent them from returning to Greek waters. In one case, they shot and killed a Greek fisherman, mistaking him for a migrant. The European Union required asylum seekers to file their claims in the first European country they entered, meaning that most had to file claims in countries like Greece, Ukraine, Poland, and Slovenia, which denied asylum at rates far greater than other European countries.

The Spanish Coast Guard intercepts a boat carrying African migrants near Tenerife Island. Credit: UNHCR/A.Rodriguez



India maintained blatantly discriminatory policies toward refugees, maintaining completely different rules for different refugee populations. Tibetan refugees from China were most favored, and were able to enjoy most of their rights. India maintained camps for Tamil refugees, and while it permitted them to leave them for employment they had to return for fortnightly censuses, and India restricted aid to the camps. The least favored were ethnic Chin from Myanmar – in India's eastern Mizoram state, the Government permitted a local nationalist group, the Young Mizo Association (YMA), to persecute Chin refugees. When the Government considered granting work permits to the Chin in 2003, the YMA responded by rounding up Chin refugees and forcibly returned them to Myanmar.

A Chin refugee from Myanmar recuperating at a clinic on the India-Myanmar border. Credit: Women's League of Chinland/C.Zahau



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*Al Tanf camp, home to Palestinians trapped in Iraq, in the wake of a fire that injured 28 refugees.
Credit: UNRWA*

■ Iraq ■

Shi'a militias in Iraq have particularly singled out Palestinians for retribution since the fall of the Hussein regime in 2003. From 2004 to 2007 more than 85,000 Palestinians fled targeted violence, leaving only 15,000 in Iraq. Gunmen in Ministry of the Interior uniforms have killed Palestinians, firing on UN buildings in the process. Insurgents tortured Palestinians to death and fired mortars into Palestinian neighborhoods.

■ Kenya ■

Kenya's Dadaab and Kakuma Refugee camps are two of the worst examples of the long-term warehousing of refugees in the world. Kenya confines the majority of its refugees to these camps, denying the right to work and live where and how they choose. The camps are rife with human rights abuses: rape, domestic violence, and other crimes were common in the camps; traditional court systems imprisoned refugees for offenses including adultery that were not crimes under Kenyan or international law; and the local population clashed with refugees over resources like firewood.



Kakuma camp, Kenya, where rape and domestic violence were common and refugees often clashed with the local population. Credit: SaveDarfur.org/A.Osman

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■ Malaysia ■

Another country that picks and chooses the groups to which it offers protection, Malaysia gave it to some groups of Muslim refugees, but detained, caned, and deported others. In some cases, Malaysian officials turned deportees directly over to human smugglers who extorted fees for smuggling the refugees back into Malaysia or sold them into slavery in Thai fishing boats or brothels if they could not pay. Malaysia employed the RELA, a volunteer militia, to enforce its immigration laws. The RELA was infamous for its violent raids, and refugees were frequently injured or killed fleeing them.

Members of the People's Volunteer Corps (RELA) taking a foreign worker caught without a permit into custody, in a November 2007 raid that netted 56 arrests.
Credit: Rescue Dog



Russia created a Byzantine system of rules and regulations that made it virtually impossible for asylum seekers to obtain legal refugee status. It expelled thousands of potential asylum seekers without hearings, and forcibly returned at least one UNHCR-recognized refugee (a Falun Gong practitioner) to China. Russia also collaborated

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with Uzbekistan's security forces in kidnapping and returning Uzbeks suspected of opposing their Government. Xenophobia was rampant as well, with 31 murders and 200 assaults in apparent hate crimes during the first half of the year.

Ultrnationalist, anti-immigrant demonstrators march in Moscow in 2005.
Credit: AP/I.Sekretarev



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■ Sudan ■

Sudan has kept Eritrean refugees warehoused in camps for nearly 40 years, and Ethiopians for nearly 30. The 12 camps lacked adequate drinking water and food. Sudan denies the right to work, leaving them unable to supplement their rations. Sudanese authorities reportedly attempted to lure Arab Chadian refugees to Darfur to repopulate villages whose inhabitants had been driven out by the *janjaweed*. Sudan even attempted to bring in Chadian refugees who had fled to Niger in the 1970s to take the ethnically cleansed villages.



Eritrean refugee children await High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres on his April 26, 2007 visit to Wad Sherrife camp, Sudan.

Credit: AP/N.Nasser

■ Thailand ■

Thailand returned thousands of Myanmar refugees directly over to authorities in their home country, and informally forced nearly 25,400 more back across the border. Thailand does not recognize most of the Myanmar refugees in its territories, and those that it does it warehouses in camps without the right to work. It allowed notorious *Or Sor* militia to administer some of these camps, provoking a riot when one shot and killed a refugee in December. On its website, the Ministry of Interior listed “to intercept and drive back refugees” among its key functions. Officials also confined nearly 8,000 Hmong refugees from Laos to a camp and vowed to force them back to Laos, “no matter how many bullet wounds they have.”

A Lao Hmong refugee recounting her 2005 refoulement from Thailand and subsequent torture and sexual harassment by Lao police. Despite the abuse, Laos forced her to testify to her good treatment to an international delegation before she was able to escape again to Thailand. Credit: AP/A.Weerawong

